

Section 295

Cambrai

The 5th Battalion

Preparations

14th-19th November 1917

Lt Col Bartley Dennis returned to command the 5th Battalion from hospital on the 14th October 1917. On the 30th October they moved to the area of Hesdin for reorganisation and training after a period of no less than 18 weeks without relief. The Battalion was at Rougefay and on the 15th November it was ordered to move to Peronne by rail. They set out the next morning, the 16th and arrived at Peronne at 1500 hours. From there they marched to Haut Allaines which they reached at 2000.

On the 18th November the 5th were moved up again, first to Sorel le Grand on the 18th and then to Pezières on the 19th ready for the off which was timed for the 20th. Here they were kitted out for the forthcoming attack.

The final positional move was completed by 0300 on the 20th and the 5th Royal Berks were lined up near Villers Guislain with their allocation of tanks and one section of machine guns and two of trench mortars. The tanks were located 1000 yards from the front line with the infantry sheltering behind. All four companies took part arranged from left to right in the order D A B and C. Lt Col Bartley Dennis was still not fully fit so the battalion was once more under the command of Lt Col E H J Nicholls. The attacking strength was 17 officers and 550 other ranks.

The troops had been given detailed instructions about ways of coping with the perennial problem of communication in battle. There were to be no telephone lines; visual signalling and runners were to be the main methods, with pigeons and dogs reserved for emergencies. Tanks would communicate using coloured discs, green for instance indicating wire cut or crushed, red the opposite. Troops were to speak back to the tanks even more simply: a helmet on a rifle held above the head would mean 'tank wanted'.

The Plan

General Byng had been planning the attack at Cambrai in great secrecy so as to achieve the maximum surprise. Opposite III Corps it was believed that the enemy were only lightly disposed with 15 battalions. Facing them as part of III Corps, 12th Division would have two attacking brigades, the 35th (including the 5th Royal



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Berks) on the right and the 36th on the left. The significant difference in the planned offensive was the curtailing of the opening bombardment. The new tanks were to be employed to cut the wire.

12th Division had a front of some 1700 yards. 35th Brigade would lead on the right with the 5th Royal Berks and 9th Essex leading the assault.

The plan was based upon three lines identified by Black, Blue and Brown. The Black line was the German outpost line and this is where the initial attacking wave would halt to allow the second wave through to take the 'blue line'. This involved breaking into the Hindenburg system and seizing the Banteux Spur on high ground to the east of Gonnellieu. When this was taken 36th and 37th Brigades were then to attack a further line known as 'brown' under cover of a smoke barrage. Attainment of this final objective would represent an advance of nearly 5000 yards.

Behind the Tanks

20th November 1917

A short lived barrage opened at 06:20 on November 20th. Ten minutes later the tanks began to move at a rate of only 50 yards per minute followed closely by the troops. The answering German barrage was slow in starting and even then was weak and poorly directed. German machine gun fire was, as usual, very effective and C Coy in particular suffered badly. Two of the three tanks in front of D Coy broke down as did three out of four in front of B Coy. The tanks did not steer a true course and veered off to the right causing some changes in objectives.

At 0705 the tanks had reached the German lines which were only lightly held. It was not until they reached the support trenches that the main resistance was encountered and fighting was fierce.

C Company

C Coy on the right started off badly suffering severe casualties from machine gun fire, however their tanks kept going and they finished up at their objective with only 14 men remaining in two sections under Sergeants Stokes and Seymour. Stokes party had pushed forward along Quarry trench and had reached the communications trench leading to Quarry Post. Here they established a bombing post which eventually was withdrawn to a crater on the Banteux Road. Seymour's party established a strong point at the junction of Quarry Support and the Communications trench leading to Quarry Post.

Reading Mercury 26/1/1918

There was some desperate fighting in a village known as Villars Guislain. It was not part of the campaign that our Company should enter the village, but seeing that another battalion on our left was having a rough time of it we rendered them assistance... The Boche finding that they were so hard pressed retired from the village, but just before we entered it we had the misfortune to lose 2nd Lt Ross, who was severely wounded in the thigh. We were fighting with Companies of other Regiments. As I have said we took our objectives and without waiting, advanced further and dug ourselves in. This we did because we could see that half a mile away the enemy were mustering for a counter attack.

I will refer to a splendid bit of work on the part of 2nd Lt J T Ross and a party of 6 men. After we had taken the main line this officer espied a gun which was being fired, rapidly, in various directions. he collected the men, made a bayonet charge and took the gun and five prisoners

One of the participants, who was unnamed wrote later in the Berkshire Chronicle of 18th January 1918:

We launched our attack on the right of Gonnellieu and Villers-Guislain and our objective was a portion of the Hindenburg line which meant that we had to capture a couple of trenches, the second one being, I should think, a thousand yards off. The attack was launched at 5.20

am and we were soon faced with a heavy bombardment from the Germans. The barrage we put over was light owing to the large number of tanks we had in action.

The first line soon fell into our hands and when we finally took our objective we captured a couple of positions in a quarry on our right in order to strengthen our position. Later in the day the enemy counter-attacked us heavily. He had already sustained many casualties, but rushed up reinforcements with the object of regaining that which he had already lost, but at no point did he succeed in penetrating our line. As a matter of fact the Boches were repulsed with heavy loss.

The fighting throughout the day was of a severe character. Second Lieutenant H K de Vries was killed at the top of the German parapet when we were taking the second line and Sergeant-Major Howard, who held the DCM and the Croix de Guerre, was mortally wounded by his side. Both were struck by bullets from machine guns.

Two of our sergeants and a number of men performed a very fine piece of work during the time the Boche were counter-attacking. Sergeant Seymour from Reading and Sergeant Stokes with a party of 30 belonging to C Company held a trench for several hours and with bombs and rifle fire were able to stop several counter-attacks. The casualties in this affair did not run into double figures, and this in spite of the fact that the enemy's fire was very fierce. All the signallers did extremely good work and we captured a large number of prisoners and several large trench mortars. We held this position for ten days during which we were almost continuously subjected to heavy fire. [TX00315A]

The citation for the DCM awarded to Sergeant Stokes read :-

16631 Sergeant E Stokes ... During the preliminary advances, all the officers and senior NCOs becoming casualties, he found that he had reached the company's objective with but a handful of men. By his rapid action in working round the to the right flank of the enemy front line he succeeded in deceiving the enemy as to his real strength, drove back superior forces and established a bombing block in the position previously selected. Despite the frequent hostile attacks he not only held this position, but eventually completely repulsed the enemy and consolidated the right flank of the division. His courage and fine leadership were beyond all praise. [TX00453]

D Company

D Company's role in the fighting was described by a sergeant writing in the Berkshire Chronicle of 25th January 1918:

A member of the battalion who was wounded at the end of the first days fighting on November 20th and who has recently been discharged from hospital supplies some additional particulars of what took place on that occasion.

He said: When we made the advance I took a dozen men over myself. Before we had gone a thousand yards and before reaching the first line, four of the party were killed by machine gun fire. We were in front of the tanks and I signalled back for one of them to come to our assistance. In the meantime we got into a shell hole and very soon the tank put out of action the enemy's machine gun which had been playing on our party.

Leaving the shell hole we followed the tank until we got over to the first line. A tank on our right was put out of action and the one which we were following went to its assistance on account of the heavy machine gun fire which was being directed at it from the right flank. We followed it in order to render help to the other section on the right. We took the first line. Afterwards the tank on our left was captured by the Germans and was occupied by them, whereupon a section of the Berks and a section of the Middlesex - by that time several regiments had got mixed up - made a rush to retake it. Inside the tank were five of the enemy who fought desperately to retain possession, but the Berks with the others, struck hard at their tank, and within about a quarter of an hour the tank was recaptured. Very little damage had been done to it and members of the Tank Corps coming up behind on foot, occupied it and the tank was soon in action again.

My section and others of D Company were by the side of xxx when other companies on our right wanted assistance. We went over and rendered the aid which was needed and making a flank attack got back to our original position. We had, however, to fight hard to do this. A battery of field guns was firing point blank at us, but afterwards the whole battery was captured by the Berks. We took it by means of a bayonet charge. Our artillery fired point blank at it and we made the charge under cover. The German major and five of his men were wounded, but the remainder were killed.

Well, the tanks went on in front of us while we held the captured battery, which we eventually handed over to reinforcements. We continued to follow the tanks until the second line, the main line, was taken. The Boches put up some heavy fighting but we still pushed forward and ultimately occupied the trench. Prior to this there was some desperate fighting in a village known as Villers-Guislain. It was not part of the campaign that our company should enter the village, but seeing that another battalion on our left was having a rough time of it we rendered them assistance. At that time we were guarding the right flanks. We first of all took the main German objectives and within less than an hour the Boches finding that they were so heavily pressed, retired from the village, but just before we entered it, we had the misfortune to lose Second Lieutenant Ross who was severely wounded in the thigh. We were fighting with companies of other regiments. The other companies of the Berks were on the right guarding the right flank. The Boches fought desperately to retain possession of the position. There was a great deal of hand-to-hand fighting; they had plenty of machine guns and bags of snipers. One gun was being fired from a chimney stack of an old farm house and was causing a great deal of damage, but it was eventually put out of action and the building was so battered that in the end there were only a few bricks remaining. Several other of the enemy's machine guns were put out of action and he suffered heavy casualties before he evacuated.

As I have said, we took our objective and without waiting advanced further and dug ourselves in. This we did because we could see that half a mile away the enemy were mustering for a counter-attack. I would refer to a splendid bit of bravery on the part of Second Lieutenant T Ross and a party of six men. After we had taken the main line this officer espied a gun which was being fired rapidly in various directions. He collected the men, made a bayonet charge, took the gun and the whole of the gunners numbering five. The Germans fought hard but had met their masters. [TX00326B]

B Company

B Coy on C Coy's left reached and established themselves in Adams and Quarry Trenches. A Coy further left held Quarry Support Trench and D Coy on the Brigade's extreme left occupied the enemy's support trenches.

By 0745 Battalion HQ was able to move up to the Black line. The Battalion had achieved all its objectives and by 1300 the news came in that all of 12th Division had reached their objectives. The 5th had captured about 60 prisoners, two machine guns, and six trench mortars. By nightfall the new position had been consolidated with a defensive flank on the right covering the Banteux Valley and the St Quentin Canal.

Berkshire Chronicle 29/3/1918:

The 12th Division, to which the 5th Berks belonged, moving along the Bonavis Ridge on the right of our attack encountered obstinate resistance at Lateau Wood which sheltered a number of German Batteries.

The 5th Berks, who went over singing, whistling and smoking cigarettes behind the tanks encountered no serious opposition till they got into the enemy trench. Fritz ran when he saw that defeat was certain, but afterwards discovered that he could get on the flank between the Battalion and the French, and there was a good deal of enfiladed fire to be faced. The enemy's wire was very thick but the tanks flattened it and there was no difficulty getting through the wire except for snipers, the Germans having the gaps covered. Several men were knocked out in getting through these gaps.

The battalion had started the day with 17 officers and 590 other ranks and had lost 6 officers and 161 other ranks. Two of the officers had died, 2Lt H K de Vries had been killed and 2Lt T P Wickett had died of wounds. Major J L Carr, Capt W V Adams, 2Lt T S Tester and 2Lt J T Ross were wounded. Of the other ranks 24 were killed, 121 wounded and 16 were missing.

The Berkshire Chronicle of 7/12/17 reported

A member of a battalion of the Royal Berks Regiment, now in hospital at Sheffield, writing to his brother says "I was in the big push at Cambrai and well we knew it. When I got hit I had to lay out in no-mans-land in a shell hole for ten hours. I crawled in when it was dark. The fighting was very fierce and we were subject to very heavy firing. The tanks did marvellous work; it was grand sport to be amongst so much fire. We had a number of casualties but I am glad to say there were not many killed. They were mostly wounded. [TX00640]

Berks Chronicle 19th April 1918:-

Second Lieut T P Wickett (of Liskeard) who died of his wounds received the same day was wounded in the German trenches when he had taken his objective, being caught in enfilade machine gun fire. His Colonel wrote:- He is a great loss to the battalion. The Battalion did splendidly and your son played a large part in his personal courage and leading of his men." The chaplain wrote:- "He was of a most loveable disposition and was a

favourite among officers and men and we are all deeply grieved at his loss. I saw him in the dressing station; he was very restful and was happy that he had done his duty." A brother officer wrote:- "He was quite cheery and happy and awfully keen on his work and will be badly missed by his friends and brother officers. It was something to be proud of to see the gallant way in which everyone went about their work." [TX00496]

Second Lieut de Vries was a gallant man; he went over the top with a revolver in each hand [TX00497]

Major J L Carr was hit by a piece of 5.9 shell before the enemy's second line was taken. [TX00498]

Capt W C Adams MC was wounded by a machine gun bullet in the right leg. [TX00499]

Second Lieut Ross was severely wounded in the thigh just before the battalion entered Villers Guislain. A splendid bit of bravery was performed by Second Lieut Ross and a party of six men. After the Berkshire had taken the main line this officer espied a gun which which was being fired rapidly in various directions. He collected the men, made a bayonet charge and took the gun and the whole of the gunners numbering five. [TX00500]

Deaths in the period 20th to 23rd November were:-

20th November

16926 Harold Adams of Leicester
 26839 Albert Edward James Albury of Reading
 19691 Charles John Barney of Woking
 16103 John Bird of Wokingham
 16334 Claude Richard Boyle of Stratford
 38076 William James Brain of Bristol
 38079 Mark Symonds Burroughs of Axminster
 27284 Henry Bayliss Carey of Birmingham
 19345 Thomas Chandler of Reading
 19535 Norman William Cooper of Wokingham
 202769 Alfred Victor Dando of Bristol
 35629 James Davis of Bordesley Green
 19790 Albert Henry Dawson of Abingdon
 2Lt Harry Kumbing De Vries of Liverpool
 203436 Joseph Hubert Dyer of Bodmin
 23713 Alfred Griffith of Aberdare
 37719 William Hayton of Birmingham
 10737 William Hessey of Hungerford
 19822 William Hipgrave of Pangbourne
 8000 Charles Percy Howard of Brackley
 17985 Alfred William Irving of Henley OT
 35628 William Kingston of Birmingham
 26334 George Henry Main of Reading
 11591 Albert George Meadows of Kentish Town
 203422 John Cecil Septimus Minnett of Kidderminster
 203287 Percival George Morton of Reading
 10890 George Ormiston Pallatt of Brixton Hill
 35854 William Charles Radburn of Birmingham
 35583 Martin Sawyer of Birmingham
 41717 Arnold Semken of Woolwich
 11129 Arthur Lloyd Smith of Watford
 27073 Frederick Tasker of Cleethorpes
 9604 George (Jack) Albert White of Maidenhead
 2Lt Thomas Pemberthy Wickett of Liskeard
 12893 Claude Young of Wendover

22nd November

37397 William Henry Britt of Warwick

Quarry Post

24th-29th November 1917

Hostilities resumed on the 24th when the 5th Battalion, with the 7th Suffolks on their left were ordered to capture and consolidate Quarry Post which had remained in German hands. This was a strongly wired and well fortified position from which the Germans had been able

to enfilade the advancing troops and also to fire into the positions on the Baneux Spur. The capture of this post would enable a more defensible line to be established.

D Coy, led by Capt J R West took all its objectives with no losses and received congratulations from both Brigade and Divisional Commanders.

Lt Col Nicholls, writing in the Battalion War Diary, commented on the strength of the German position and considered the tactics adopted by his men to be a very good example of the platoon used as a self supporting unit, combining bombing squads with a rifle grenade barrage in circumstances where an attack had to be mounted along the trenches themselves.

The action was reported in the Berkshire Chronicle on 19th April 1918:

On 24 November a party consisting of two platoons under Captain West, the platoon commanders being Lieutenants Merrick and Cook, were responsible for a splendid piece of work which was so highly thought of by the authorities that the details were sent round so that other units could '*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*' it. The stunt was against Quarry Post, a fortified island trench which the Germans held very strongly. The attack was entirely successful, being carried out without a single casualty.[TX00495A]

For five days they were able to enjoy a period of quiet with no casualties. Deaths in this period were:-

24th November

203395 Percy Wainde of Nuneaton

28th November

34988 George Henry Kettle of Coventry

29th November

9304 Charles Stevens of Maidenhead

Under Attack

30th November 1917

The German counter-offensive was code named Gotterdammerung. It was launched on 30th November at 0700 It began with an artillery barrage falling on 55th Division to the right of the 12th. The 12th were disposed with 35 Brigade on their right with two battalions in line, the 5th Royal Berks on the right and the 7th Norfolks on the left. The 9th Essex was in support and the 7th Suffolks in reserve.

Opposite 35th Brigade was the German 110th Grenadier Regiment of the 28th Division. According to their Regimental Historian, their impression was that almost up to the moment of the attack the British suspected nothing. There had been no shelling the night before, and the British response to the opening bombardment at 07:00 was slow. Thereafter however, the historian noted, resistance stiffened and the defenders of the positions on the Banteux to Gonnellieu road, where the Royal Berkshires were, offered determined resistance and inflicted heavy casualties.

The full force of the German assault fell on the 5th at 0730. Quarry Post was so far beneath the brow of the hill that they had not been able to observe the Germans concentrating for their attack. The German troops attempted to storm the post as well as the adjoining trenches. They forced the Royal Berks back some 200 yards to Adam trench where a fierce bombing fight started. At first the Royal Berks were able to drive the Germans back to regain the ground they had lost but shortage of bombs caused them to retreat back to Adam trench.

Despite being under attack by a heavy barrage of trench mortars and a flank attack up New trench, they were still holding Adam trench at 0930. But on both sides the British forces had not been able to hang on and the Berks' flanks were dangerously exposed. They were gradually withdrawn to Bleak trench and Bleak support trenches north of Newton Post. The Germans had reached Newton Post and Gonnellieu.

Berkshire Chronicle 18th January 1918

We held the position for ten days during which time we were almost continually subjected to heavy fire. During that period we had been reinforced and so had the other units. We had had a gruelling on the 20th but it was not to be compared with that which we experienced on the last day of the month. In the early hours of the morning, long before daybreak, the Boches for four hours put over a terrific bombardment on the whole of the trenches, causing a number of casualties and then launched his counter-attack. He had prepared a great concentration of guns and it was apparent that he meant to get back what he had lost at any cost. He simply hurled masses of men against us - they came over in waves - and as to the fire, well I have been at the front getting on for three years and have been through several engagements, but the barrage he put over on this occasion was far the heaviest I have ever experienced. Everywhere men were exposed to a scythe of bullets and it is remarkable how any of us came out of the inferno alive.

The enemy first of all got through for about a mile on our right and after taking the villages of Gonnellieu and Villers-Guislain, worked round the back, capturing our supports before we actually knew that they had gone by and then the Boches made an onslaught on our division at the rear. For nine or ten hours we offered a desperate resistance against great odds, fighting with marked resolution. The enemy actually got half-way through into another village but the Guards came up and pushed them back. Although the enemy got nearly all his objectives the Guards at several points were successful in arresting his advance and also did much to take the pressure off both divisions. I might say here that I observed none of the Boches renowned pill-boxes either on the 20th or the 30th but I know the Germans were very heavily entrenched and very heavily wired. [TX00315B]

Berks Chronicle 25th Jan 1918:

Further details of what transpired on the 30th of November comes from another source. Our informant said that the Boches broke through on the right and were three miles behind the battalion. That was within an hour of their original attack. We were still holding out in the front line until six hours after the Germans attacked and

until the order came to withdraw. The on our right and left had been forced out of their trenches but our battalion still stuck to the majority of its posts. We only fell back when the order came for us to do so, when our ammunition and bombs had all been run out. We were withdrawn to a new position and we held on there for two days until we were relieved. During those two days we were subjected to a heavy fire. The attack was the biggest since the second battle of Ypres. [TX00326C]

Reading Mercury 19/1/1918:-

In the early hours of the morning of the 30th November, long before daylight, the Boche, for four hours, put over a terrific bombardment on the whole of the trenches. He had prepared a great concentration of guns and it was apparent that he meant to get back what he had lost at any cost. He simply hurled masses of men against us. They came over in waves....

The enemy first of all got through for about a mile on our right and after taking the village of Gonnellieu and Villars Guislain, worked round the back, capturing our Supports before we knew they had gone by, and then they made an onslaught on our Division from the rear. For nine or ten hours we offered a desperate resistance. The enemy actually got half way through into another village but the Guards came up and pushed them back.

On the Royal Berks' left the Germans had broken through the 7th Norfolks to be held by the 9th Essex.

Brig Gen Berkeley Vincent, commanding 35th Brigade wrote in his report to 12th Division:

The enemy were moving steadily along in extended order with very little bunching and apparently nothing was firing at them. They carried packs and wore steel helmets and the leading waves sometimes fired from the shoulder as they advanced. The whole thing appeared well controlled and disciplined. They seemed to walk into Gouzeaucourt without any opposition whatever.

At 10:30 a message was received at Divisional HQ that the enemy were in Gouzeaucourt and that the northern part of 12th Divisions front had been pierced. At 10:45 orders were received for both the Royal Berks and the Essex to carry out a fighting withdrawal towards Villers Plouich and La Vacquerie respectively. The Germans were being strongly supported by low flying aeroplanes and by noon they were in possession of Villers Guislain, Gonnellieu and Gouzeaucourt.

Berkshire Chronicle 19/4/1918

The Germans attacked with great tactical skill and with imposing forces. They were also supplied with hosts of aeroplanes which came over in droves and began to come right down, attacking the astonished British troops with revolvers, some of the men actually being hit from behind. The aeroplanes formed a sort of screen in front of the infantry, so that what the enemy lost in not putting up an artillery barrage he gained by his aeroplane barrage.

it was evident that the British troops were taken completely by surprise and many units were either forced to retire or were captured. The enemy used gas shells though not many in the vicinity of the Berkshires.

The 5th Berks will always be able to look back with pride to the work they accomplished on this day of disaster.

They certainly set an example by the tenacity with which they held to the piece of line which they had captured ten days before. and only falling back when the situation was desperate. The first thing the Berkshires knew of the enemy's success was when the Suffolks were being taken through the Berkshire communications trench as prisoners in charge of Boches. The Berkshires shot the Boches and sent the Suffolks back.

Within an hour of the original attack the Boches had penetrated on the right and were three miles behind the battalion. Things, indeed, looked ugly, but despite the risk of capture the Berkshires held on to their position and actually retained most of their posts until six hours after the attack commenced, though other neighbouring battalions had been forced back.

Some exciting events had happened. Brigade Headquarters had been captured by the enemy and the Battalions quarters with some of the papers fell into the enemy's hands. A very brave deed was performed. A brigade major stayed behind when the Boches were within ten yards and then went into the dugout and destroyed papers. A staff captain got away in his his pyjamas and gum boots on his motor cycle.

When at last the ammunition and bombs were exhausted the battalion had orders to fall back. The situation was a desperate one, for it was necessary to cut a way through the enemy who had practically surrounded the brave Berkshires. The Berkshires did not retire till they had done everything possible to save the guns and good work was done in this direction by digging. in and forming outposts. The Berkshires had done rarer execution amongst the enemy, the machine guns accounting for numbers of them.

The Germans were endeavouring to outflank this portion of the British force and but for the tenacity of our officers and men in holding on till they were told to retire the whole division might have been captured.

"I have never seen so many Germans in all my life" said one experienced Berkshire sergeant " and I have been out a good while. I saw the artillery limber up, gallop out of action for a few hundred yards and then fire at the enemy at dead sights (point blank). They repeated this several times. The Brigadier in command of the Brigade which included the Berks was responsible for some very good work that day. He reorganized several detachments of men and with the aid of several tanks and a reserve battalion led a counter attack, driving the Germans back 1000 yards in the neighbourhood of Gouzeaucourt. At one point in front of the Berkshires the enemy came up to our belt of wire, halted and sent forward some men who were employed as wire cutters. As fast as these men were caught in the act of cutting the wire by our machine gunners other men stepped forward and took their places. [TX00495B]

On the previous night six young subalterns had joined the 5th Berks with a hundred men. At the end of the days fighting only one of those six young officers was with the battalion. Judd and Wykes had been killed, and Schofield, Hill and Jones were prisoners..

A new position was taken up on Cemetery Ridge and in La Vacquarie. The 5th and the 9th Essex occupied a sunken road but were out of touch of any other British forces. They were ordered to withdraw further to the British line which had been the jumping off point on the

20th, before Villers Plouich. This withdrawal was completed by 1530 when A Coy under Capt J M Ready was dug in facing Gonnellieu. 35 Brigade had been reduced to about 300 men and by nighttime the remainder had established a defensive flank to the west of the Cambrai Road.

Their heroism was recorded in the Berkshire Chronicle:-

Another piece of bravery which fully deserves publicity was that of Captain Ready MC and about fifty men. The party had been cut off and isolated, but they hung on to their position for thirty-odd hours until they were rescued by another division. The party were very frequently in fact almost continuously being attacked with bombs and rifle grenades and the Berks men retaliated with rifle fire and bombs. Some of the party were killed, wounded and gassed but the great majority of them escaped. The manner in which the captain and his men faced the position is worthy of the highest praise. I should also like to pay a tribute to our colonel who went right through both affairs. His powers of organisation and the bravery and courage he displayed were indeed wonderful. The adjutant also did splendid work. [TX00315E]

The problems had been compounded by lack of communication with Brigade HQ as the telephone wires had been cut. The Berkshire Chronicle of 18th Jan 1918 carried a report of bravery by some of the Berksire signallers.

In the morning our wires were broken in several places with the result that communication to brigade headquarters was cut off. With that bravery which is characteristic of the British a party consisting of Sergeant Boyd of Reading [*Sgt James Boyd 9941*] who has already a war decoration and was in charge, Corporal Histed (of Shiplake) [*Cpl Arthur Histed 10563*] who holds the Military Medal, Private Garlick (of Reading) [*Pte James Garlick 10441*] who has already won the Military Medal and bar, Private Froggatt [*Pte George E Froggatt of Chester 16301*] who comes from the north and Private Richens (of Abingdon) went out and mended the wires under fire which was very heavy. All had several narrow escapes and Richens was wounded in the hip. The work occupied about an hour and communication was not only restored to headquarters but a large party of men who were surrounded and were in great danger of being captured or killed or wounded got away. Assistance was sent and the men, after fighting their way through and with mud and water up to their hips came up to our artillery, entrenched themselves and helped to save a battery of guns. [TX00315C]

The Berkshire Chronicle of 28/12/17 reported:-

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER HONOUR - Sergeant James Boyd, Royal Berks of Elgar Road Reading who has already won the Meritorious Service Medal has been recommended for further distinction. In a recent attack a number of the Berks men were surrounded. The communication wires had been cut, but Sergeant Boyd, by his signalling, assisted a large number to get away and so avoid capture. Sergeant Boyd joined soon after the outbreak of war and went to the front in the early part of 1915. He has seen a great deal of fighting. Prior to joining up he was employed by Messrs Huntley Bourne and Stevens. [TX00590]

The guns referred to was a battery of 18 pounders

which the Germans were desperately trying to capture. The British artillery was being particularly effective against the advancing Germans. The Berkshire Chronicle continues the story:-

The Germans were making a rush for the guns which they had almost surrounded when the party I have spoken of together with the other Berks men and the Guards, thwarted the desperate attempts which the Boches made to capture them. We entrenched ourselves and by rapid rifle fire we were able to arrest the enemy's advance, the guns which consisted of 18-pounders being in the meanwhile removed by our horses. Only one was put out of action. The major of the battery who had asked us to line up and so assist to save the guns, was unfortunately killed.

Just about this time I observed our artillery fire with open sights at 300 yards and could see Germans being blown to pieces in large numbers. There is no doubt that whatever success the Boches won, they gained it at a very great sacrifice. Their losses must have been enormous. In regard to the saving of the guns I should like to say that splendid work was performed by our signalling officer, whose name I cannot remember and Regimental Sergeant Major Tilbury. [*RSM William H Tilbury 16689 of Hurley*][TX00315D]

The night of 30th November was bitterly cold and, according to the 110th Grenadier Regiment's historian, the German troops appreciated the quality of the British greatcoats and blankets they had acquired during the day's advance. He went on to mention with some surprise the large quantities of tobacco and cigarettes, the tins of food and the unopened parcels from home which were found everywhere in the British dugouts.

33744 Hugh Wilson of Crossley by Johnstone
35002 Frederick Gerald Wilson of Coventry
23392 Harry Woolford of Burghfield
2Lt Ernest Arthur Innes Wykes

1st December 1917

At 0430 on December 1st the battalion was expecting a fresh dawn attack but it did not materialise and it was not until 0930 that the German barrage began. The attack such as it was, coming from the direction of Gonnellieu, was easily repulsed by the Guards and the 5th were left with little to do and passed the day quietly.

By now such was the disorganisation the remnants of the Brigade had attached themselves to 20th Division and when the 20th was relieved by the 61st in the evening of the 1st, the brigade was able to find its way back to the assigned sector of the 12th Division.

2nd December 1917

By 0400 on the 2nd the 12th had collected itself together again. Another attack was expected that day but it did not materialise. So at 15:45 the remnants of the 5th Battalion were assembled and in the evening the Brigade was withdrawn to Hendecourt under the command of Col Nicholls. Here they were accommodated in huts.

Casualties

The battle had cost the battalion 8 officers and 295 other ranks. Officer details were recorded in the Berkshire Chronicle of 25th January 1918:-

The battalion lost a number of officers on the 30th. Second Lieutenant F R Judd and Second Lieutenant EAI Wykes were both killed and Second Lieutenant H Schofield and Second Lieutenant FCR Hill who are officially reported missing and now stated to be prisoners of war in Germany. Second Lieutenant C W Adcock was wounded on the same day as also was Lieutenant H K May. Amongst the officers' casualties on the first day were Second Lieutenant T T Wickett who was killed soon after the battalion had reached its main objective. Second Lieutenant H K deVries, nephew of General Smuts was shot dead by a Boche officer at close range. Captain W C Adams MC was wounded by a machine gun bullet in the right leg. Major J I Carp got hit by a bit of a 5.9 shell before the enemy's second line was taken and Second Lieutenant J L Ross and Second Lieutenant T S Tester were also wounded. [TX00326D]

In addition 2Lt E Jones was reported missing. Of the other ranks 55 were killed, 120 wounded and 120 missing.

It is worth noting that five of the subalterns listed above had joined the battalion only on the previous night. Two were killed and the three initially reported as 'missing' were later found to be prisoners of war.

Deaths on the 30th November were:-

22325 John Luther Ansell of Maidenhead
34392 Ernest William Avory of Kensington
38071 Tom Bartlett of Woolminster
203278 James William Bentley of Hay Mills
37590 Herbert Blackall of Maidenhead
36885 Frank Broome of Immingham
33728 Robert Brown of Consett
16915 James Bull of Ealing
26163 William Ernest Cook of Charlbury
34669 Cecil John Coplestone Davey of Exeter
37385 Alfred Ernest Day of Theale
39350 Walter Dwight of Chesham
37279 David Ford of Reading
33338 Sydney John Fray of Winchester
37546 James Henry Godfrey of Holyport
37283 William Alfred Goodwin of Reading
29569 William Hack of Reading
203267 Percy Edwin Harman of Dedworth
203408 Albert Henry Hawker of Bristol
202601 Ernest Arthur Hawkins of Balsall Heath
36062 William George Hawkins of Stanford Dingley
10398 Frederick Hermon of Reading
202706 John Denis Higgley of Church Enstone
27117 Joseph Hockley of Moulsoford
34703 Alfred Hodge of Altarnun
202731 Sidney Holland of Leicester
37746 William Honeybone of Birmingham
34984 Reginald Hope of Birmingham
13560 Alick Hornby of Shepherds Bush
22430 William John Howells of Thatcham
32905 William John Hulcup of Reading
36663 Harry Algar Hutchings of Exeter
37852 George Jackson of Tamworth
2Lt E Jones
2Lt Frank King Judd
33747 William Kemplay of Wakefield
17576 Edward John Kimber of Marcham
16377 Walter Noble King of Reading
35838 Albert Loveridge of Birmingham
41247 Thomas Alfred Lukeman of Reading
33746 Francis Mallon of Cathcart
36212 James Mayo of Ross on Wye
37718 Robert Megson of Wykeham
41737 Christopher Joseph Morris of Bromsgrove

223010 Sidney Nicholas of Truro
 35857 Frederick James Palmer of Birmingham
 33991 Henry Pedrick of Okehampton
 202864 William John Perkins of Lutterworth
 34110 Wilfred James Pike of Thatcham
 36931 Charles Henry Read of Stamford
 37477 Charles George Reynolds of Rushden
 33765 Campbell Frederick Rix of Aldershot
 18985 Benjamin Smith of Newbury
 202858 William Frederick Smith of Birmingham
 34044 Edmund Tom Stokes of Nailsea
 223013 George Sumner of Beckley
 36981 Leonard Thornton of Northwich
 21912 Stephen Turvey of Reading
 16955 Albert Tween of Battersea
 41275 James Henry Walker of Chilton
 203328 Jesse Ward of Cookham Rise
 31391 Horace Watmore of Reading
 41243 Sidney Victor White of Ascot
 203280 Henry George White of Reading
 202693 William Jesse Whiting of Newport Pagnell

The battalion was re-organised on December 3rd as two 'companies' with D and a composite company made up of the remnants of A, B and C. They were down to a total strength of 16 officers and 341 other ranks.

Aftermath

Awards for gallantry displayed during the operations of 20th and 30th November were made on January 18th 1918, as follows:

DSO Lt Col E H J Nicholls MC [TX00386]
 Capt J M Ready MC
 MC Capt C A Mallam
 Capt J R West
 Lt H K May
 Hon Lt & QM J R Oxley
 DCM Sgt Percy Albert Victor Leppard [16095]
 Sgt Charles Seymour [11268]
 MM Sgt Frank G Burton (bar) [10580]
 Sgt Grigg Francis Epsley (2nd bar) [9309]
 [TX00370]
 Sgt Harry France [32153]
 Sgt William Frederick Webster [10839]
 LCpl Albert Charles Cooper [11123]
 LCpl Francis William Hammon [10499]
 LCpl Frederick May [13035]
 LCpl F Rudd [9306]
 Pte Albert Bale [10355]
 Pte G Turrell [7410]

The Berkshire Chronicle of 25th January 1918 published some short biographical detail of the men decorated:-

Major (acting Lt Col) E H J Nichols MC awarded the DSO for the fighting on November 20th. He has been with the battalion since August last, being transferred from the East Surreys. The gallant officer comes from

fighting stock, his great-grandfather having commanded in the year 1812 the 66th Foot (now the 2nd Bn Royal Berks) whilst his father fought in the Crimean War.[TX00319]

Capt J R West (awarded the MC) is the son of Mr and Mrs West of Erleigh Rd Reading. He joined the Berks Yeomanry soon after the outbreak of war, fought at Gallipoli where he was wounded, took part in the operations in Egypt, got his commission in the Royal Berks early in 1916, fought with the battalion in Salonika, was invalided home towards the end of that year, was afterwards transferred to another Royal Berks battalion and has been with it in France since May last. He is a Company Commander. He is an old Kendrick. [TX00320]

Lt H K May (awarded the MC) who is also a Company Commander belongs to Ireland and has now been three times wounded. He has been with the battalion since the commencement of the Somme offensive. [TX00321]

Sgt Seymour (awarded the DCM) belongs to Reading. His work on November 20th was referred to in our columns of last week when an NCO in giving an account of the fighting stated that Seymour with others held a trench for several hours with bombs and rifle fire. [TX00322]

Sgt Leppard (awarded the DCM) comes from the Windsor district. He got his award for general good work in the attack. [TX00323]

Brig Gen Vincent was in correspondence with the Official Historian many years later, when the Cambrai volume was being prepared He was asked to give his views on parts of the draft text and in a letter dated 29th July 1944 he wryly commented:

My opinion was then and is still, that if instead of all that cavalry, a brigade of fresh infantry had been sent forward in lorries, Cambrai would have been taken on the morning of the 20th.

Later in the war when I visited Cambrai I spoke to an old woman at a farm south of the town. She pointed to some trees about a quarter of a mile away and said that les Anglais got as far as that. *"But why did you not come on"* she asked. *"The Boche had gone. They drove my cows away. Then when you didn't come on, they returned, but not with the cows"*

Sources

Petre pp 227-231
 5th Battalion War Diary
 35th Brigade War Diary
 Berkshire Chronicle
 Reading Mercury